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# Reagan Administration: Funding Cuts News Articles (1981-1982): News Article 68

Edwin Wilson

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*Leisure and the Arts*

WSJ - 8/31/81

## Does the Reagan Team Understand the Arts?

By EDWIN WILSON

*New York*  
The great trumpet player Louis Armstrong once said when asked what jazz is: "Man, if you gotta ask you'll never know." That observation unfortunately describes the confusion of many Americans vis-a-vis the arts in general. Right now a presidential task force is preparing a report on funding the arts and one can't help wondering whether the Reagan administration does not suffer from the same problem as Satchmo's questioner.

Historically Americans have been wary of the arts. The country was founded in part by the Puritans, the same group that closed all the theaters in London in 1642 and banned, among others, Shakespeare from the stage. As Lewis Lapham pointed out in a recent article in Harper's magazine, John Adams at the time of the Revolution said that the arts had always been the product of despotism and superstition and had no place in our republic. Mr. Lapham also quoted Ben Franklin's remark that "to Americans one schoolmaster is worth a dozen poets, and the invention of a machine . . . of far more importance than a masterpiece of Raphael."

In certain cities, individuals—most of them strongly influenced by their European heritage—founded and supported symphony orchestras and museums, but the notion that as a nation we should endorse the arts was alien to us. We have been visionaries in many fields, but not in this.

We failed to acknowledge that art is as much a necessity of life as clothing, shelter and sleep. It is not frivolous. The evidence for this is all around us. Every child engages in role-playing and imitation—forms of acting—as ways of learning and growing up. Every society on record has ceremonies complete with costumes. (The Galanos gowns worn by Mrs. Reagan as well as the other finery on view in London at the royal wedding were such costumes.)

On a more mundane level, everyday speech is dependent on devices of poetry. Language and mathematics are symbols pure and simple, and when a scientist speaks of the "big bang" theory of creation, or a businessman of the "bottom line" he is using metaphor.

If the use of art is universal, the question becomes the kind of art a civilization chooses to develop. A nation can survive on junk art just as it can on junk food. Some societies, however, have recognized the profound possibilities of art and have gone for the best. This was the case with the Greeks in the 5th Century B.C. who built the Parthenon and produced the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, with the people in Medieval France who built the cathedral at Chartres and with the Medicis, the great patrons of the arts in Renaissance Florence.

Even extremely macho societies—no less macho than our American West—have recognized the value of art. The Japanese samurai, among the most disciplined war-

riors the world has known, were expected to be as adept at writing poetry as at wielding a sword.

We, on the other hand, came quite late to the realization that there may be something to the arts. A mere 15 years ago the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was founded along with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Most state arts councils are even younger. Twenty-five years ago large foundations began funding the arts and recently corporate giving has been on the rise.

Almost as quickly as we began to support the arts on this scale it became apparent that we were ill-prepared to deal with the situation. After our long history of selling the arts short, we did not have a group of citizens with the background and experience to make intelligent decisions in awarding grants to individual artists and organizations. There were exceptions of course—in cities like Minneapolis and Winston-Salem. But by and large there was a lack of individuals with a genuine understanding of art. As a result, those responsible found it difficult to tell a true artist from a charlatan. Arts panels and boards of directors often backed a flamboyant artistic director who sent an organization's budget through the roof and at other times picked a cautious mediocrity who couldn't tell an abstract painting from a child's doodle.

Despite these problems, though, a beginning was made. Now President Reagan seems determined to turn the clock back. He has asked for a 50% cut in NEA funding, as if it was one of those bloated agencies with an outsized budget. By federal standards the NEA budget is infinitesimal: \$159 million in the current year which is two one-hundredths of one percent of the total.

A few pieces of military hardware—a dozen Trident missiles or F16 fighter planes—would cover the entire cost. If we funded the arts on the same per capita basis as France, our budget would be nearly \$3 billion, and if the same as Austria, \$22 billion.

At the same time that he argued for cuts, the President appointed a task force headed by movie actor Charlton Heston, college president Hanna H. Gray and Daniel J. Terra, ambassador at large for cultural affairs. The main job of the task force, which makes its report in a few days, is to find sources of funding to make up for the losses when the NEA is cut back.

It is almost certain that the differences will not be made up regardless of the clever tax mechanisms to be proposed. And more importantly, this emphasis on money shows where the President's heart is.

Where the arts are concerned there are important issues facing this country; dealing with them should be the first order of business for any task force. Should we stress preserving art from the past, or the

creation of new work? If both, in what proportions? Should we fund institutions exclusively, or individual artists as well? Do we support only "serious" or "high" art, or also popular arts like folk music and handicrafts? These are complex issues that can be settled only by a prolonged dialog, not by simplistic pronouncements.

Underlying these questions are more fundamental ones: What values do we seek from the arts, and what role should they play in our national life? How do we educate young people in the arts so that they can assume responsibility for these decisions in the future?

There are indications that some members of the task force wanted to focus on these questions and they are right. Once we settle these matters, the financing becomes easy. If we are convinced that art can play an indispensable role in informing our national spirit, we will find the money.

Of course we could decide that the arts do not matter, in which case we would not have to fund them at all. That would also be tantamount to saying that as a nation we have no soul.

Edwin Wilson is the Journal's theater critic.